DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 519 CS 217 615

AUTHOR Schindler, Kirsten
TITLE Invent an Audience--Create a Context: How Writers Are Referring to Readers.
PUB DATE 2001-06-00
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the International Conference of the European Association for the Teaching of Academic Writing across Europe (1st, Groningen, Netherlands, June 18-20, 2001).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Awareness; Higher Education; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Processes; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS Audience Research; *Author Reader Relationship; Collaborative Writing; *University of Bielefeld (Germany); Writing Tasks

ABSTRACT

In teaching writing, the "audience" became and still is fundamental, leading to the question of how students can learn to adapt their text to the assumed readership and at the same time, learn to write for their addressees. A study focused on how writers cope with the writing process, asking several questions about the concept of audience and its relevance in the writing process. At Bielefeld University, 16 groups took part in a collaborative writing experiment. In group writing the writers themselves quickly change from writer to first reader, dependent on the formulation activity. The writers were inexperienced with their writing task, the audience was explicitly part of the writing task, and a computer game manual was chosen as the writing task, because it is a text type containing different communicative and technical requirements. In the seminar room, a laptop was installed with the computer game and with text editors and image editing/processing tools to use. In addition, pens and paper were provided, making it possible to write drafts or whole texts. Both the interactions and the production process were videotaped. One group, Anna and Timo, did not develop an idea about the context of their text, e.g., the usage of their manual while playing the computer game. So their addressee orientation remained abstract. Another group, Emma and Katja, used different writing and audience concerning strategies; they thought about concrete characteristics of their addressee, but they also decided on a specific type of reader they were writing for. As a result, a well organized writing process and a well written text can be found, a text pattern for computer games. "Addressee" seems to be a highly flexible concept. This leads to difficulties for teaching writing and imparting proceedings or strategies about the way writers should handle the "audience." (Contains 35 references.) (NKA)

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Invent an Audience – Create a Context. How Writers are Referring to Readers

by

Kirsten Schindler

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Invent an Audience – Create a Context. How Writers are Referring to Readers

Thinking about *Audience* in writing is not a new topic. Especially since the 1970s it has been discussed controversially (Mitchell/Taylor 1979; Ede 1984; Ede/Lunsford 1984; Elbow 1987). This theoretical debate was brought up for discussion by linguists, philosophers, and psychologists and was mainly concerned with the question who and what the *Audience* in writing actually is (Ong 1975; Overington 1977; Long 1980; Bonk 1990). In the field of teaching writing, the *Audience* became and still is fundamental, dealing with the question how people, students in particular, can learn to adapt their text to the assumed readership and at the same time, learn to write for their addressees (see: Berkenkotter 1981; Murray 1982; Park 1982/1986; Schriver 1992; Ramanathan/Kaplan 1996).

Until today a lot of research has been done, and the concept of Audience is no longer at the centre of contemporary research concerning writing. However, many questions are left unanswered, there appears to be a lack of precise knowledge on how writers cope with *Audience* in their writing process. Therefore, my aim is to focus on this aspect, basing my approach on the following set of questions:

- What ideas or abstract constructs do writers form about their *Audience*?

This question aims at getting more detailed information on how the *Audience* becomes reality for the writers even though it is not physically comprehensible like in face-to-face communication.

- How does the concept of Audience influence and possibly organize the writing process?

In the well known model for the text production process by Flower and Hayes (Flower/Hayes 1980) the *Audience* is both, part of the task environment and of the writer's long term memory. In this model, *Audience* only influences the planning of the text, but not the formulation or reviewing. In my view, this seems to be rather implausible.

- Is the orientation towards an addressee a relevant task in the writing process?

Some results of research on spoken language suggest that the orientation towards an addressee is an additional demand which is neglected by more complex, unknown tasks and by loss of time (Horton/Keysar 1996/1998; Polichak/Gerrig 1998). Others regard *Audience* as a fundamental orientation in every form of communication (Nystrand 1989).

The importance of research in *Audience* in writing is connected with two fields of writing research: the cognitive writing approaches in the tradition of Flower and Hayes and the social-communicative approaches like Nystrand and others have demonstrated (Nystrand 1990). However, it also has a strong impact on the teaching of writing concerning three aspects: When we know more precisely how the orientation towards an addressee is organized in the writing process and when we know e.g. whether the orientation towards an addressee facilitates the writing process or whether this is an additional task for the writers, it becomes clear that with this knowledge specific writing tasks can be created. These tasks can either give additional information about the *Audience* or can provide further information that broaden the context (for example an analysis of the genre, text functions etc.). Additionally, certain writing strategies of inexperienced writers can be supported and

thus, writing problems can be analysed in a different way, i.e. as addressee problems.

First of all, I would like to distinguish concurrent names I will use for the phenomenon of the "other" in written communication. I'd like to present four terms which mean respectively different concepts: recipient, reader, audience, addressee.
With the term recipient, I refer either to oral communication, or to similarities between oral and written communication.
The reader refers to a concrete person, who is, at a specific moment, reading a text. A reader is normally used in singular, because reading is understood as a singularly activity. Sometimes a writer knows his/her reader (e.g. by writing a personal letter), therefore, he/she has often a more or less clear idea about his/her reader. Nevertheless, writers very often do not know who their readers are, they may have no clue, who will read their text (e.g. with manuals written for technical equipment). One important feature of the concept of a reader is that it has to be seen in relation to the written product, the text, and not the writing process.
Audience is the most global term amongst these four, because it is a singular term and always refers to more than one person. Secondly, it is used both for oral and for written communication and thirdly, it is used for both the text and the process. However, *Audience* is also a problematic term, which has been controversially defined: the definition implicitly presupposes a strong relationship between oral and written communication within the concept of Audience. In a way, this is fascinating and may be quite fruitful for the discussion – using categories developed in the occupation with conversation analysis and the concept of recipient design (see for references: Malone 1995) – but it may hide specific aspects of written communication.
As for my research, I prefer the term addressee, it is more specific than *Audience*, because it only refers to the writing process. It focuses on the writers and their concept of the "other" they are writing for. Addressee is defined by the categories and features writers themselves are demonstrating, and not by pre-defined categories we use for the analysis. Nevertheless, I will use the term Audience, when I speak about more general aspects, because it can be understood in a broader context.

A semi-experimental study: to get to know something about the Audience

Data for a writing experiment concerning the question of *Audience* in writing has to meet specific criteria: it has to reflect the writing process and it has to make the *Audience* transparent.
Data concerning the writing process is not very easy to get, because writing is an activity which takes place in the head of writers and we only get results or fragments of this process by looking at their texts and drafts. Due to that, writing researches have profited very early from methods used in cognitive psychology like thinking-aloud protocols or retrospective interviews (Flower/Hayes 1980, Wrobel 1995). Both of these methods have a number of plausible advantages, but also disadvantages (see: Weidle/Wagner 1982; Krings 1992). A newly developed method for the study of writing is the so-called collaborative writing. Two or more writers are asked to write a text together. They have to interact with each other in order to organize their work, for example they speak aloud and argue why certain formulations should be preferred. Their interaction is video-taped and the video protocols are transcribed and analysed. By analysing their interactions a variety of materials on the writer's

thoughts can be deduced, e.g their norm set and formulation processes. This material can be examined with respect to different sets of questions (see Lehnen 1999a/2000).

Nonetheless, this method appears to be problematic, because we don't examine the writing process of a single writer, but the writing process of a writing group which has its own inherent group dynamics. Two aspects diminish these disadvantages and make it interesting for me to use this form of writing as a research method. First of all, the idea of a single writer producing a text all by himself does not reflect the reality of writing processes in the workplace anymore (Ede/Lunsford 1990; Sharples/ van der Geest 1996; Gemert/ Woudstra 1997). Secondly, the method of collaborative writing is adequate for my specific question. In group writing, the writers themselves quickly change from writer to first reader, dependent on the formulation activity. The *Audience* is therefore, already present in the writing arrangement.
Besides, Audience is a problematic concept to examine, because it is often hidden by the writing task or by conventions writers are taught and use intuitively. Therefore, I tried to support the *Audience* in the writing arrangement by three additional features.

- The writers, advanced students from Bielefeld University, were inexperienced with the writing task they had to cope with. The idea was that writing becomes more difficult for them and thus, discussion within the writing group became more important. The task for them was to write a manual for a computer game, a text type they only know as users by reading it when they play these games.
- The *Audience* was explicitly part of the writing task and was changed (by a constant writing task and writing arrangement) in different groups. All types of *Audience* included in the task were strikingly different from the writers themselves in age and other characteristics. Three different groups of *Audience* were selected: children in grammar school, people over 50, and no information about the Audience. The assumption was that the reflections about the addressee are supported in the groups where the *Audience* was explicit. Porter/ O'Sullivan have experienced that age differences are important for Audience perception (Porter/O'Sullivan 1999).
- The manual was chosen as a writing task, because it is a text type containing different communicative and technical requirements (see Becker-Mrotzek 1997). The orientation towards an addressee could therefore, be observed by a multitude of demands. Their task has to be seen in two respects: they had to understand the game by trial and error and they had to transfer the images (and therefore, the simultaneous actions) of the game into a structured text. In this way, the influence of the writing context was minimized, because the *Audience* didn't show up in an a communication that had already started, where the writers "only" had to meet the needs of the partner by continuing the written communication. On the contrary, the writers had to develop their ideas about the *Audience* on their own by constructing an addressee.

16 groups took part in the experiment. The participants were between 22 and 31 years old and all of them were students or PhD-students at the university. The writing experiment was carried through in a seminar room at the Bielefeld University between July (pre-test) and October 2000. In the seminar room, a laptop had been installed with the computer game, text editors and image editing/processing tools, they could use. In addition, pens and paper was provided as well, giving the possibility to write drafts or whole texts. Both the interactions and the production process of the written text on the computer was video taped.

Although 32 persons (from different faculties: faculty of art, law school, faculty of mathematics and computer science) took part at the experiment, I examined reiterate problems (concerning the competence of the Audience, the naming of objects etc.) and specific strategies to cope with these problems.

Local-addressee vs. global-addressee: two concurrent strategies

Two strategies are most prominent, I would like to explain them by referring to two typical groups who took part at the experiment, both of them had to write a manual for children in a grammar school.
The first group is "Anna and Timo". Anna is an inexperienced player, Timo has some experiences with computer games, but does not play them regularly. Despite their understanding of the structures and aims of the game, they had some problems in playing it, which may be the result of their lacking experience. During the observation of their interaction it is revealed that they don't organize their writing by planning the writing process or developing an idea of their product. On the contrary, they started with their first formulation very quickly, using the computer to write down their ideas. As a result of that, they can be called product oriented writers, which means that they concentrate on the sentence level and the concrete formulation, but do not see the text as a whole (see as well: Lehnen 2000).
Anna and Timo give us a broad variety of hints about their addressee and deduce norms from the text production from these characteristics: the usage of short sentences, easy words and metaphorical expression. They assume that children in grammar schools do not possess the same amount of active vocabulary (lexical items), as they themselves, and will not understand complex sentence structures.
Nevertheless, the reference to the *Audience* is specific in two ways. First of all, it is not as important as other arguments they share, the aspect *Audience* is often only a followed and isolated argument. Secondly, the reference to the addressee is embedded in local arguments and is decided locally, which is even more important for the analysis. This has two problematic consequences: The concept of their addressee as it is deduced from their remarks is inconsistent. At the very beginning, they think about using the well known computer game Pac Man as a mode of comparison for the game they have to explain. But then they start thinking about the possibility that children in grammar schools may know neither computers nor computer games and decide against using Pac Man. A few minutes later they presuppose computer specific vocabulary in using the term "cursor", a term one cannot understand if one is unfamiliar with computers. Therefore, they presuppose knowledge of computers they refused to use before.
Another consequence for the locality of the addressee is its isolation from the writing context. Anna and Timo do not develop an idea about the context of their text, e.g. the usage of their manual while playing the computer game (before playing, within the play, only to look something up etc.). So their addressee orientation remains abstract.
As a result of that, they produce an incoherent text, which could be of different origins, but one of them is definitely their inconsistency of their addressee. The task appears to be asking too much of Anna and Timo, they have to cope with different and unknown tasks (like writing a manual, writing for children). They ignore some of them from time to time and they are not able to find solutions for a few other tasks.

The second group, "Emma and Katja", differs fundamentally compared to Anna and Timo. They are a mixed group, too: Katja is the expert for computer games, she plays regularly. They also have some problems with playing the game, but don't have any with understanding it. The fundamental difference lies in their planning procedure. They start writing at the computer about 20 minutes after receiving the task. During this time, they write different drafts and versions on paper and think about the game in a more global way. I will call these types of writers process-oriented writers, because they concentrate on their writing process which they take as a resource for their text production.
They also give a number of hints about their addressee. They estimate the addressee as competent with regard to computer games (and computers in general) and as less competent with regard to reading abilities, but not regarding understanding abilities. Their image of the addressee is created at the beginning of the writing and serves as an orientation for following decisions taken by them. They are aware that they are creating a global concept. In the continuing writing process, the reference to the addressee is often implicit and only recognizable by certain formulations, but it is used as a monitor and a judgement criteria. Concerning the addressee, it seems to be common ground for them.
Emma and Katja use different writing and *Audience* concerning strategies, they think about concrete characteristics of their addressee such as age and competences, but they also decide on a specific type of reader they are writing for. Their addressee is embedded in a reading-playing situation, which is partly fictitious, partly known by experience. As a result, a well organized writing process and a well written text can be found, which is appropriate for children and accordingly, the text pattern for a manual for computer games. Of course there are other aspects and explanations for this "success", but it seems reasonable to give their detailed planning and conceptual thinking within the creating of a coherent image of an addressee a prominence.

Some first results: For teaching the addressee

Two different *Audience* related strategies that are strongly determined by the organisation of the writing process, especially the planning phase, could be found. This supports the argument of Flower and Hayes, who explain the *Audience* as an external, but very influential aspect for the planning and especially the generating of ideas. Nevertheless, remarks about the addressee could be found during a lot of different activities like structuring, formulating and editing. Not only the activities where the addressee becomes explicit and/or action-oriented show a great diversity, but also the concrete forms, used by the writers. On the language surface, Audience manifests itself in terms like children, the child, them, they, first class, first to fourth class and by the underlying characteristics presupposed by the writers in terms like experts of computer games, non-experts, users of computer technology etc. Even if the *Audience* is explicitly part of the writing task, the writers themselves create their addressee, their creation varies between these different groups and – and this is quite remarkable – concerning the different tasks and demands within the writing process. Writers use different strategies to support the *Audience* and create their addressee, in the course of which the usage depends on the concrete problem which has to be solved. Addressee seems to be, and this is a basic result, a highly flexible concept.

This leads to difficulties for teaching writing and imparting proceedings or strategies about the way writers should handle the *Audience*. It seems to be not helpful to provide writers only with biographic information and a static view of their *Audience*, but it is necessary to make clear that *Audience* is a part of a more global concept, namely the text environment. The demand for writers is therefore, to include the reflections about the *Audience* in reflections about the context of the text, the text's functions and the genre-specific demands. All of that may constitute the addressee of a text. Thus, writers can develop their own concept which is decisive and flexible enough. Sometimes it may be useful to provide writers with text patterns to give them a clear orientation for their writing (Schindler 2001). In addition, it may also be useful to analyse text patterns as a mode of *Audience* orientation together in groups.

To conclude, the examination method which has been used in the experiment, collaborative writing, may also be used as a didactic concept (see Lehnen 1999b, Lehnen/Schindler 2001), because writers take over different perspectives. By doing this they may get an idea about the most fundamental principle of *Audience*: to understand that there is someone else who is reading and trying to understand your text, and also to experience this someone else in checking your own thoughts and formulations.

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